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SUBJECT: TFX001: MALDIVES SITREP -- A UNIQUE NATION WITH
UNIQUE RELIEF NEEDS

REF: COLOMBO 31 AND PREVIOUS

1. (SBU) Summary: During a visit by USG officials to Maldives January 2-4, a clear picture emerged of the devastation of the local islands and the government's needs for assistance. On three islands visited, varying degrees of destruction met the U.S. team with piles of rubble where houses once stood and streets littered with the debris of household possessions, growing moldy in the equatorial sun after being submerged during the December 26 tsunami. In the wake of the disaster, the government has specific needs. Water availability and distribution topped the list, followed by temporary shelter, clearance of debris, and rehabilitation of generators and fishing vessels. An overriding need for all these efforts is logistical support to distribute resources and expertise to the affected islands. From the visit, USAID and US military officials see clear areas where the U.S. can offer assistance. End Summary.

An island paradise

2. (U) A U.S. team visited Maldives January 2-4 to assess humanitarian and relief needs following the December 26 tsunami. The team comprised poloff, DAO's security

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assistance FSN, two members of the US military Combined Support Group (CSG) team and one member of USAID's DART team. Following visits on Male' with Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) officials and representatives from various UN agencies, the team visited four islands throughout the island nation.

3. (U) Although Maldives' 200 inhabited islands and 100 tourist islands were all affected to different degrees, the tsunami washed through all the islands, submerging the entire

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country for a time. For poloff, who had been visiting and working in Maldives for over 18 months, it was hard to rationalize the quiet simplicity of Maldives -- white sand, blue water, green palm trees -- juxtaposed against the rubble that was once walls of houses or the upended fishing boats (the primary source of income) tossed on the shore or debris and brush washed into the once-pristine lagoons. Where do you go when you live on a patch of sand in the Indian Ocean less than one-kilometer square and the ocean around you starts to pour through the streets and rise? Where do you go when you live on an island of 3,700 and there is only a handful of buildings more than one story and the water reached four feet at the island's highest point and does not recede immediately?

Coping with the tragedy

4. (U) Maldivians suffered the loss of 75 citizens, plus 3 tourists and 3 expatriate workers, with another 24 Maldivians still missing as of January 3, 2005. While casualties are significantly less than other countries in the region, the death toll is severe in proportion to the country's small population of 280,000. The World Health Organization defines countries as a disaster area if casualties are on the order of 2-3 (or greater) per 10,000. Maldives falls in this category, with the death toll making it the third-worst affected country in the region, according to Moez Doraid, UNDP Resident Representative in Maldives. The government's tsunami information website states that, as of January 3,

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over 12,000 people are homeless with some 8,000 of them categorized as displaced. Three schools are being used as relief centers on Male', currently housing over 800

internally displaced people (IDPs). These centers can only be temporary since school is now scheduled to begin January 25, postponed from the original January 9 start of the school year.

15. (U) In addition to the physical trauma, various interlocutors made one point over and over to the U.S. team that all Maldivians are suffering psychologically. What do you do when you live on an island and it floods? One interlocutor said that Maldivians love the ocean and are having trouble comprehending the violence of the water on December 26. Another said that Maldivians, especially young boys, are always playing in the water, but that no one wants to go in the water now. (The U.S. team did not see any Maldivians swimming in the islands' lagoons during the two-day visit.)

Devastation first hand

16. (SBU) Government officials say it is hard to accurately estimate the scale of the damage since, they admit, not every island has been visited by a government official for an initial assessment. They state that they have re-established communication with every island, but for some that means via hand-held radios or boats from nearby islands ferrying messages. The U.S. team, accompanied by officers from the Maldivian Defense Ministry's National Security Service (NSS), visited three islands that were among the most severely affected in the wake of the December 26 tsunami. According to GORM and UN statistics, 20 inhabited islands were completely devastated and either need to be wholly redeveloped or to have the population permanently relocated.

17. (U) In the Raa Atoll, approximately 140 kms northwest of Male', the U.S. team visited Kadholhudhoo island, one of the densest in terms of population within Maldives. The island, and it 3,700 inhabitants, is less than one kilometer square and was one of the most severely affected by the tsunami. Three people died in the flood, during which water reached over 6 feet in some places and did not recede for over 20 minutes. In the aftermath of the disaster, the narrow streets are strewn with rubble and household items. All of the residents were evacuated to nearby islands. The men return during the day to sift through the remains of their families' possessions and retrieve anything worth saving. According to the atoll chief, the islanders do not want to return to Kadholhudhoo and want the government's help to relocate. NSS Major Nazim told the U.S. team that the especially low-lying island was traditionally prone to small-scale flooding during the monsoon season and the government had been trying to convince the community to move elsewhere. Nazim thought the GORM was supportive of the islanders' wish now to relocate.

18. (U) On January 3, the team visited Kolhuvaariyaafushi in the southern Meemu Atoll, some 160 kms south of Male'. The large island with a population of 1232 people suffered 10 deaths from the tsunami and 6 residents are still missing. Water reached over six feet in some places and locals said the entire island remained inundated for over one hour. Upwards of 50 people were injured, with some now at the hospital in Male' for treatment. Local officials told us that approximately 500 people were evacuated after the tsunami hit, but most have returned. The women and children

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are living under tents on the shore, while the men sleep in shifts on the dhonis in the harbor. The local island chief said that President Gayoom had visited the island on December 29 and promised government resources for relief and rehabilitation efforts. Given the relatively large landmass of the island (about 15 acres), government officials state the island must remain inhabited, thus the commitment of resources to helping the community rebuild.

19. (U) Later on January 3, the team visited Vilufushi and neighboring Guraidhoo islands in the Thaa Atoll, almost 200 kilometers southwest of Male'. Vilufushi, also with a population of 1200, has suffered severely from the tsunami. Fourteen residents had died, with another three missing and presumed dead. One islander recounted seeing the tidal wave wash 200 residents off the island, only to have the second wave sweep most of them back. The second-most populated island in the atoll, the government is also intent on rebuilding here. One resident, a construction projects manager for the government in Male', was back home, helping coordinate efforts to clear the rubble from the streets. He added that the community still needed engineers to come and assess that stability of the houses that remained standing, fearing that the entire island would need to be razed and rebuilt.

110. (U) The nearby island of Guraidhoo, seat of atoll administration, was much less affected by the tsunami and now

hosting many residents evacuated from Vilufushi. The island's population was normally 1800, but had now swelled to over 2300 with the influx of 500 IDPs. During the visit, the U.S. team met the island chief who stated that the displaced families were being housed by the local residents and that multiple families were now living in one house. The islanders were also helping those fellow community members whose house on Guraidhoo had been damaged.

Clear and specific needs for assistance

11. (U) While the level of damage and devastation varied among islands, there were some immediate and long-term needs that were clear across all the places visited. In addition, they are the same needs that emerged after multiple discussions with government and UN officials involved in the relief effort. A list of primary needs follows below:

-- Severely damaged water sources: All the islands reported that their water collection and storage systems were damaged and some severely. Desalinization equipment, in use on a few islands, had been damaged by the flood. Well water, used for bathing and cleaning, was now saline with salty water re-filling the few wells that had been pumped. Catchment systems for collecting rainwater from roofs were destroyed and dozens of 2500-liter plastic tanks -- often, one per family -- used to store water were washed away. NSS and ministry officials noted that, in the northern part of Maldives, January was the onset of the dry season and rain could not be expected before May. Coupled with the damage to the water sources, the tsunami also impacted the sanitation systems on many islands.

-- Generators under water: Many generators were running at the time of the tsunami and were damaged during the event. According to a non-professional review by the U.S. team, some looked salvageable, possibly requiring only immediate cleaning and maintenance. In response to questions, government officials and representatives at the UN said that there had not been an assessment of the generators on the islands. At the moment, the government did not have sufficient capacity or resources to be able to accomplish such an assessment or develop a plan to get the generators restored and back on line.

-- Toll on livelihood: Every island visited (and many more not seen) suffered the loss of more than one fishing vessel (dhoni). Fishing is the main income generator on all these islands and the loss or damage to vessels will have a severe impact on the economic livelihood of each island community. In addition, government officials told us that, in traditional Maldivian style of helping each other, operators of many of the intact dhonis had voluntarily offered their assistance for evacuation and relief efforts. The help was welcome, according to these GORM interlocutors, but their diversion from fishing also further endangered sorely needed income. Others had not yet returned to fishing simply because they were still coping with the loss of their home or other possessions and were focusing their efforts there.

-- Loss of agriculture: The saline water that inundated the islands was taken up by the island's banana, breadfruit, and papaya trees, severely affecting these staple foods for the islanders. On one island, it was a scene reminiscent of a Northern American autumn instead of the ever-summer weather, with brown leaves littering the ground. They had all fallen in the last week and locals were unsure where the trees would survive or continue to bear fruit.

-- Homes destroyed and rubble-strewn islands: In whole or parts of islands, rubble, whether remnants of coral-walled homes or remains of household possession and commercial wares, litter the streets. Those without homes need temporary shelter so that they can move back to their home island and participate in the rehabilitation process. Before any thought of rebuilding or restoration of utilities can begin, however, the debris must be cleared and disposed. On some islands, heavy equipment is too large for the narrow streets. On one island, a bulldozer and dump truck were already at work clearing the shore. In any case, the GORM does not have enough -- or appropriate -- equipment to attend to the task on all the islands.

-- Overriding challenge of logistics: The nation also faces a huge challenge in simply accessing and meeting the supply needs of each island. The island chain stretches over 900 kilometers from north to south and it is beyond the capacity of the government to provide immediate logistical support to every single island. Further, UN officials said that supplies may reach the "capital" island in each of the country's 20 atolls and individual islands are responsible for traveling to the central island to collect supplies, but are hampered by lack of fuel for their vessels.

¶12. (SBU) In addition to the needs for the relief effort, the NSS made a personally appeal to the U.S. team for support. NSS personnel are deployed throughout the islands to assist the local communities and help coordinate relief and rebuilding efforts. Sensitive to the strain on local resources and intent on being self-sufficient, the NSS asked for rations of meals ready to eat (MREs) for its personnel stationed on far-flung islands. Specifically, they estimated that they would need 10,000 MREs to sustain some 350 personnel over a 6-month period. (DAO Comment: PACOM delivered 41,880 Humanitarian Daily Rations -- does not include pork -- to Maldives on January 4, 2005.)

Comment

¶13. (SBU) Through meetings with interlocutors on Male' and visits to some of the worst affected islands, the U.S. team gained a clearer picture of the challenges facing Maldivians as they deal with the tsunami tragedy. Fortunately, there are some specific areas where U.S. resources match with the GORM's needs and it is now incumbent on those of us here in Colombo to work together to coordinate and procure those resources for Maldives. It is important, however, that the public and decision makers not assume the tragedy is less severe in Maldives simply because the magnitude of the devastation seems less. The impact to this small island nation is in proportion to the effect of the tsunami on larger nations in the region. The GORM seems well-organized in their efforts to deliver relief and assistance, but officials are obviously hindered in their capacity to do so. They simply do not have the resources or the ability to provide the necessary relief and need help from the entire international community. The U.S. team was gratefully received by both officials on Male' and residents in the local communities. We must now follow up on that presence with a considerable U.S. effort towards relief and rehabilitation. Several planeloads of DoD and OFDA relief supplies have been gratefully received so far. An OFDA/DoD team will fly back to Maldives on January 7 as the next step in the U.S. assistance. End Comment.
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